

<crew talk>

Karen Burn: This is oral history number 419. The following oral history interview was conducted by Karen Burn and Art Gomez of the National Park Service for the National Park Service, USS Arizona Memorial, at the Ala Moana Hotel, Honolulu, on December 6, 2001, at 5:50 p.m. The person being interviewed is George Kahanu, who was a welder at the naval shipyard on December 7th, 1941. For the record, would you please state your full name, place of birth, and birth date.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Full name George Hawaii Kahanu. Uh.. born in October uh.. 10th, 1917. And?

Karen Burn: Place of birth.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Place of birth? Kalihi, Honolulu, Oahu.

Karen Burn: And what did you consider your hometown in 1941?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: My hometown was uh... Honolulu, Oahu.

Karen Burn: Okay. And what were your parents' names?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: My dad was George Keoloha [ph?] Kahanu. And my mother was Florence Kahanu.

Karen Burn: Okay. And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Hm. Uh... three sis- four sisters and three brothers.

Karen Burn: Okay. Where did you go to high school?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Kamehameha School for Boys.

Karen Burn: And I know at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, you were actually working as a civilian welder. So could you tell us a little bit about how you came to be working in that position, what kind of training you had, and how you came to be a welder?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Okay. In the uh.. school that I went to, Kamehameha School for Boys, uh.. they had a program, both uh.. academic and uh.. vocational. And uh.. by the 10th grade, you had to uh.. select a subject that you thought you'd be interested in. And the program consisted of the first three months rotating from uh.. we had uh.. subjects that were specified that you had to take and then uh.. electives. And uh.. they- you had to take carpentry, electrician, and then one elective. And I selected to take uh.. welding, because I thought it would be an interesting uh.. you know, trade. And so uh.. the last two years of schooling uh.. we had a program that uh.. what they call uh.. vocational training. And uh.. you would go out and work in a particular shop, any shop, whatever it was, for two weeks. And then you'd come back in school for two weeks. So when you went out to work in the shops, wherever it was, uh.. you'd work with qualified mechanics, real journeymen. I mean, people who knew the business. And that way, you got to be, you know, you picked up the experience not from so much books, but from actually learning from these people who, you know, you assisted or helped working. So I- I did that for uh.. two years. And uh.. when I graduated, I uh.. went and I worked uh.. at that time what was known as the Interisland Steam Navigation Company. And this was a commercial company that provided transportation between islands. And they had like the Huma Hula [ph], the Hawaii, the Hawaii Ali Ali [ph?], and the Hula Alali [ph?], four ships sailing. And uh.. two of them were combination ships. At that time, they would go to the outside islands, these two, Huma Hula and Hawaii, and they would load with cattle. They were cattle boats. And then uh.. and then they also had spaces for passengers. So these two boats did that, hauling cattle. And then they had two ships that had uh.. cargo space, and they carried like vegetables from the outside islands, cabbage, uh.. tomatoes, uh.. whatever. And they would sail every evening from Honolulu and- and go to the outside islands. So uh.. this was the way of uh.. commuting between islands. And I worked there until uh.. a couple years from 19-- I graduated in 1937 and I worked from- there from, uh.. about a year. And uh.. about that time, the uh.. American Bureau of Shipping coming in with- came in with new regulations for compartmentation of the ships. You had to make the ships watertight. So we had a lot of jobs installing these watertight bulkheads and things. And then uh.. shortly after that, uh.. the employees decided to go on strike to get more money. And the- and the company said, Stanley Kennedy, the owner, says, "Hey, I'm losing money already, so I'll shut down. And he shut the

company down. So from there, because of that, I went to work for E. Black Contractor, who was one of the big contractors in Honolulu in those days. And <clears throat> I worked for him until uh.. just prior to uh.. September of 1940. And uh.. then I had a friend call me. This guy used to work with me. And he, Clarence told me, "George, you know, you- you want a new job, come down to Pearl Harbor. Come down and work for Pacific Bridge." Because at that time, uh.. the Navy had let contracts out to build two new dry docks in Pearl Harbor. Dry dock number two, which was going to be 1,000 feet long and uh.. dry dock number three, which was going to be uh.. one about 497 feet. And the smaller one was for submarines and destroyers. The big one is for carriers and- and battle _____. So I came, uh.. actually I came to the shipyard to work for uh.. Pacific Bridge. And uh.. at that time, if you were a welder, you'd have to be certified.

Karen Burn: And- and was it fairly rigorous to be certified?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Right. You know, you had to pass this uh.. welding test. And that was welding samples. And uh... if you passed it, then it meant uh.. you qualified. And the difference in pay like, from nonqualified you get a dollar and hour and you do tacking work. But if you were qualified, it was like a dollar and a quarter an hour. So, you know, it made sense to be a certified welder.

Karen Burn: Extra 25 cents an hour if you were certified.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: At 25 cents an hour.

Karen Burn: Right.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Right. And uh.. and at that time, the Pacific Bridge, they were working all hours, you wanted all overtime hours besides the 40 hours. So uh..

Karen Burn: So how did they decide that you were certified?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Well, you'd be-- they'd take the samples. You welded a- like a piece of- two pieces of plate six by six, and one side of it was V'd out and then they set up in an overhead position, and the you'd have to

weld in an over posi- overhead position, which was the most difficult for welding, overhead. And then uh.. after you were through, they'd take it and they'd cut strips out of it, maybe three strips. And then they'd put it in a press and they'd press it into a u-shape. And if the weld held and didn't crack or show any porosity, then it would pass. It'd have to be bent, 180 degrees, right around. And uh.. you had to do two samples. And so if you passed both plates, sample welds, uh.. you'd be certified. Uh..

Karen Burn: And you became certified in 1940?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Right. Uh-huh.

Karen Burn: Right.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: So I became a certified welder. But uh.. the- the person was named by the name of Shilfaus [ph?]. He liked the welding that I did. So before I got through, he went in the shop and called the shop master and told him, "Hey, this guy, you know, he's a pretty good welder." So the shop master, Duncan Ellis, came out. And he tells me, "George, you uh.. want to work for shipyard? How about coming to the shipyard?" And so I asked him, "Well, you know, what's in it?" He said, "Well, you got a job for life, you know, you'd be here, you can retire." I said "How about the pay?" Well, that's another story, because at that time, you had three cla- classifications. You had a third-class welder, dollar six cents an hour. And a second-class made dollar twelve. And then a first-class, you made dollar eighteen. It didn't make sense to me, right? I'd start dollar six versus dollar quarter. I said, "No, I think I want to go Pacific Bridge." He said, "Yeah," he says, "But let me tell you something." He said, "That job gonna last maybe two, three years. And when it's over, you have to come back and see me for a job." He said, "And you know what?" He said, "I'm not gonna hire you." So I mean, you know, I didn't need too much shoving to make up my mind, right? I figured well, two years versus a lifetime. I think I'd better take the lifetime job. So I decided to work for the shipyard.

Karen Burn: That's how you came to be in the shipyard.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: I never went back to Pacific Bridge anymore. I started-- actually, I started September 16th of 1940 in the shipyard.

Karen Burn: In the shipyard.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah. So uh..

Karen Burn: So were you--

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Now, at that time, Duncan Ellis told me "What else have you done in your experience?" So I told him I had worked in a shipyard in town and for a construction company. And I was a certified welder in the state. So he says, "Well, you could be either a welder or a ship fitter." And I thought, well, I knew I could become a first-class welder in- in no time. But a ship fitter might have taken me a little bit longer. So uh.. I decided to be a welder. So like I say, I started as a welder in the shipyard September 16th of 1940. I remember that date vaguely.

Karen Burn: Your anniversary.

Art Gomez: Can I ask just a technical question. Were you using acetylene at that time?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Uh.. well, I'll tell you, both. You see, uh.. when I went in, I was qualified. Now, in the shipyard, in the categories for welders, you had uh.. burner, acetylene, oxygen burner, and you had a welder, gas welder that you did with gas welding. Then you had a welder, electric welder, that did nothing but welding, electric welding. And then you had a combination welder, who was qualified to do all four. So when I went in, I was qualified to do all four. Because as a welder, for example, if you might be assigned to the sh- machine shop, and machine shop, when they machine things, maybe the machinist would cut too deep and they would send it over to the welder and to have it rebuilt. So you'd have to weld it, weld it up and they'd c- re-cut it again, you know. So if they made mistakes, it was the welder who repaired by welding. So you ask me about uh.. oxygen acetylene welding, uh.. at that time they had oxygen acetylene. We already had oxy-acetylene welding, we called, oxygen and acetylene welding. So, and plus the electric.

Art Gomez: What about the actual technique for welding? Did it vary from civilian shipyards to military shipyards?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Not really. Uh.. the-- actually uh.. qualification passing the test. Of course, you know, different welders, when you first weld, you have a technique of some people weave it, some people drag it, you know. If you're working over ti- over here, then you're kind of building up and down, up and down, up and down. And so the technique that the welder develops, it depends on the in- uh.. individual really on how he manipulates that rod around. And so in a lot of cases, uh.. if you hold a fine bead, you keep the uh.. air from getting to the metal, the hot metal. And you reduce uh.. the uh.. porosity in the welding, and even to where you have some cracks in the welding. So you know, the uh.. individual develops his own technique pretty much. But again, that- they- they are really the uh.. qualification or the requirement is passing that sample test to become, you know, certified.

Karen Burn: Sure.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: And the Navy was very critical about, you know, doing 100 percent welding job. Yeah. Uh.. maybe I should uh.. explain about the welding rod, you know, your rod _____, I'll talk about that later.

Karen Burn: Okay. So- so you were working in the shipyard still in 1941, just- just before the attack.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Y- yeah.

Karen Burn: And what you were telling me earlier about some of your specific-- the ships that you were working on at that time. Maybe you'd tell us about that.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah. Well, uh.. prior to the seventh of December, uh.. I had been working on the San Francisco. We were welding down a foundation for gun mounts. And uh.. these two cruisers came in the shipyard, the uh.. St. Louis and Honolulu, two light cruisers. And they came in the shipyard and they would berth at Baker 21. The Honolulu was inboard, next to the doc, and then the St. Louis was outboard, tied next to her. They were side by side and uh... we were reassigned on our job to go over and weld on- work on these two ships. And uh.. the job that we had to do basically was to uh.. weld rivets in the main battery gun mounts. And if you know of rivets, the outside face is countersunk and flush. But inside, you have the rivet

head. So what we had to do was go in there and weld all these rivets, ring the rivets. But before starting the job, I told the chief in the c- compartment, in- in the turret, that we had to get some interference moved. And the chief says "Well, I tell you. Let me tell you, you're not gonna move anything that couldn't be reinstalled and on the line, back in service, in eight hours." So now the question is, so why eight hours? Why not four? Why not twelve hours? He said, "Well, uh.. we have been tracking, the Navy now, has been tracking the Japanese fleet over these past several weeks and whatever." And he said, "You know, if we get the word that we are being attacked, we've gotta get that equipment back in a hurry to get underway." So I said, "Okay." That made sense, because uh.. I'm not in a turret if we're under fire, you guys are. So whatever you take out, right? We'll weld. If you don't take it out, then that's a chance you take. You take. You're in the turret, not me. So, you know, we had this. But uh.. when we finished our job, and we had to do it in a week's time, came in Monday, we finished on uh.. Saturday and- and then uh.. we were reassigned to come in for Sunday work. Now, Sunday was supposed to be a- like a day when you weren't supposed to work too hard, because, you know, you're- you've done your share during the week, you've really put out and all of that. And uh.. now you come in and on a assist work. So uh... That day Sunday, uh.. December 7th, we uh.. about 10 or-- about 10 of us came in to work. And uh.. usually, we start, at five to seven, we get a whistle. Two whistles blow <imitates whistle>, and that's to get ready, you know, get ready to go to work. And uh.. five to seven, the supervisor in charge that day, the senior man, comes out and he says, "Well you guys. You can rest a little bit because uh.. you can't get the welding rods, it's locked, secured." And the welder boss had gone home to get the welding keys because he had forgotten the keys at home. So we're all sitting there and we're talking stories, you know, about the football game Saturday night and this is Sunday, and what happened. And then we heard all this bombing going on. Boom, boom, boom. And it was coming from the direction off uh.. Hickam Field. And uh.. so, you know, we thought well, something's happening. And it continued a little bit more. So we thought, hey, we'd better go out and look around, see what's happening. So we walked towards the back, you know, of the shop and out the side door. And uh.. when we went out, we looked, and Hickam Field was on fire, you know, black smoke and shrapnel flying. And it seemed like maybe three or four seconds. And then here comes this torpedo bomber, right over our signal tower. And you could see it as plain as could be. The- the pilot had rolled the canopy back, and there he was, you know, like looking around and looking at us, the guys, or whatever. And uh.. he went on down, passed the supply building and the admiral's quarters, Alihi [ph?] Road, and then down by the submarine channel and I guess a couple of hundred feet from the uh.. battleship Roy dropped this torpedo. And you can see that splash. Well actually, he was up

there high, a couple hundred feet, and then came down to about maybe 50 feet and dropped the torpedo. So you could see the splash. And we're watching it. And a couple of seconds later, boom against the battleship. We didn't know what battleship it was at that time, but we knew it had hit the ship. And uh.. you know, you- you get to the point where you're watching all of this going on and you just, you know, you just- you just can't believe it. And then this dive bomber comes over from sub base. And he comes and he looks like he's headed for the St. Louis and Honolulu. And by then, the gun crews on these two ships I think were firing. So after that pilot dropped his bomb, he veered off. Which a good thing, because he was starting to strafe, and we were right in line because we were right near the-- almost the bow of the two ships. And when all those bullets started to fly, it brought us to life, boy, I tell you, we all came to life. And we all ran for the side of the building to get in the door. And the door had shut.

Karen Burn: You were locked out.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: So we hit the building and we fall flat on our face, and we-- and pretty soon a plane's over. And we got in the building. So my buddy says to me, "George, what are we gonna do?" I said, "You know what? I want to go upstairs. I want to see what's going on out there." He said, "I'm with you. Let's go." So we went up topside and we could see the Oklahoma out there rolling over in, you know, 10 minutes' time it appeared like, 10 minutes, she was over. On the star- on the port side. So I tell my friend, I says, "Hey Charlie, we go down. You know, the thing went over too fast. A lot of people are gonna be killed out there." So we went down and uh.. went in to see <inaudible>. We were just up there watching this battleship roll over. It rolled over so fast, a lot of people out there got killed, or were, you know, or getting killed. And he said, "Well, the procedure here is that if they need help, the shipyard commander will call us." If not the shipyard commander, then probably be the production officer captain. And if not him, maybe the planning officer. So okay, so you guys stand by. If we need help, you know, get your equipment, whatever. And then after a while he says, we went out in the shop, and "Oh, you guys go back there and stand by that fire extinguisher, just in case they come back and they attack the shops. So about 10 of us, we walked back different stations. And then he came out and he says "You guys, go back to the supply building. So run around the back end and around the corner, and draw out helmets, wartime-- World War II war uh.. helmets, you know, Army helmets. You get Army helmets and draw all gas masks."

Karen Burn: These were World War I Army helmets and gas masks you were getting?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yes.

Karen Burn: Okay.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah. We were getting, you know, and so we did that. And I'm- I'm thinking, man this is serious. Because, you know, for that, for us workers to use that, you know, they must be expecting, you know. And I'm thinking, well, you know, I know how to fire a rifle. I was Kamehameha School and we went through-- well, Kamehameha Schools have a military program. We were a military school. I mean, military, the uniform, and the whole bit. So I wasn't afraid to hi- handle a gun and whatever military uh.. requirements. But we never issued a gun. We just issued a helmet and a gas mask. So we came back in the shop and uh.. afterward, the shop got- got the word that they were gonna need some people out there. And uh.. we were told that the guy who was going out there to be the supervisor was this uh.. person we call Lefty, Julio de Castro. Yeah, he was our shop hero. And he- <clears throat> he was a supervisor, a chipper and caulker. So he selected different people, because, you know, it's just not anybody can go out there. So he selected a handful or whatever, six, twelve people. And then uh.. we says, "Well, we want to volunteer too." He said "No. I only need two burners," because the burners can cut the plate out, cut the hull plate. And uh.. and then the other people were going out with the chisels that they need with a chipping gun. So you chip and caulk, or you have a chipping gun. And this darn thing weighs about 20 pounds. And you have a- a chisel, a raw-nosed chisel or v-chisel, or, you know, a flat-nosed chisel. And uh.. get your equipment and uh.. I guess maybe about ten o'clock, they were ready to go out to the ship, the uh.. we found out it was the Oklahoma. And uh.. but you see when you got pneumatic guns, your pneumatic equipment, you need a lot of compressed air. So, you know, it's not easy at that time to get compressed air out there on the job. So what they had to do was first collect the equipment, compressed air uh.. machinery. And I think the first uh.. equipment uh.. that went out there was the uh.. diving barge from shop 72. Because they- the divers have compressed air. And eventually, they loaded a barge with compressors and took them out there. But uh.. noontime, after-- well, actually be- after this crew had left and gone out to the Oklahoma, uh.. we were told okay, it seemed like all the emergency people needed for any work out on the- on the Battleship Row, they had taken care of. The Navy didn't seem to need any more workers out there. "So you people go back on

your original assignment." So I went back to the St. Louis where I was working on, before the St. Louis in uh.. Honolulu. Did I St. Louis? I meant the San Francisco.

Karen Burn: San Francisco.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: San Francisco, not the St. Louis.

Karen Burn: All right.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Uh.. to weld gun mounts. And- and the gun mounts at that time were being welded way up on a bridge or back of the bridge. And uh.. it used to take us about a maybe a week, week and a half. They come out with this gun ring and you sit it down. It has to be level, uh.. parallel with the gun direct to it. The people who do that are the machinists, ordinance machinists, or even the design engineers would come out and sit the gun ring for level, you know. And then after they do that, then you-- the ship fitter would scribe. Because on a deck, it's not perfectly flat. You've got irregularities. And then you have to cut the ring to suit the irregularity so that when you set it down on the deck to be welded, it's perfect. You get a perfect seal. And uh.. it used to take us like, when they'd do that and then they machine it and all that. It'd take us maybe about a week before we'd get ready to mount the gun. But that day, when they brought the rings out, what they did then after they constructed it in shop 11, it went over to shop- uh.. shop 31, inside machinists. And they would skim the top, make it perfectly level. And then they came back on the ship. And when they did, then we had the engineers level it off and everything. And then we'd _____ it, cut it to suit the deck. And then after that, we'd weld it on. Now that took us maybe six hours to do that. And- and then, you know, it seemed like in no time, the guns were all ready to uh.. be mounted. And we used to drill holes to mount. Forget drilling the holes, weld the sucker down, you know? And that's what we did, you know. So instead of having one welder on each one, then you'd have three guys on there, three guys welding. So you'd weld your segment, the other guy is welding his segment. And one-third of the time, you're done. So it would take us one shift, and we'd have this gun mounted, ready to be fired. So uhm.. you know, shipyard uh.. welding work, it- it takes a lot of trades and a lot of coordination of work. So you can imagine there's times when you're standing by, you know, waiting for this guy to get ready and waiting for that material and that type of thing. But that day-- now ordinarily, when a ship comes in to dry dock or in a shipyard to be on a

regular overhaul, they unload all the fuel. First they go to the fuel dock, take off all the fuel. They go to ordinance depot, remove all the ammo. And then they come in the shipyard, and now the shipyard- ship's empty. And uh.. when they- <clears throat> when they do that, and if they have fuel on board, in certain areas they say the smoking lamp is out. No hot work. But that day, if you had nothing to do, we were walking from the San Francisco across to the New Orleans to get ammunition. Now, we civilians were carrying ammo from that ship, New Orleans, over to San Francisco and up to the gun mounts. And these were the five-inch gun mounts. Because at that time, the guns that we mounted had no ammo then, you know, they were still to be brought out. But we had five-inch at the gun mounts, ready to fire. And they did fire when these planes came over. So uh..

Art Gomez: Let me just-- I just need a clarification. So you're doing this work between the first wave and the second wave?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: It would have been later- later than that. Maybe about the, yeah, the second and the last- third wave, somewhere around there. Yeah.

Art Gomez: So you actually, between the first wave are able to mount guns on the San Francisco.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah, yeah.

Art Gomez: And they are able to actually fire these guns.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah. Right, yeah. Yeah.

Art Gomez: But they haven't been leveled, they really haven't--

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: No, no. They had been, see.

Art Gomez: They had.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: We had, yeah. We had leveled it off and welded the ring down 100 percent, and then mounted the guns. And <clears throat>

the guns weren't actually ready to fire, because we had for those guns, antiaircraft guns, the 1.1 and 40 mm, they had no ammunition, because it had to come from uh.. ammunition depot. But for the five-inch guns, we were able to go across the dock and get the five-inch shells from the New Orleans. And we carried the shells over to the San Francisco.

Karen Burn: We're- we're swapping out tapes. So when he starts up the new tape, let's- let's get that on the second tape, the timing. Yeah.

<break in audio>

<crew talk>

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: So I uh.. I told you about the hot work. Now, that is, you know, like complete violations of safety regulations. But now, you know, we were- we're not talking about peace time, we're talking now like, you know, hey, there's action going on, you got to get- get with it, you know? And so not only us, but all the other trades who weren't doing anything, you know. So as a consequence, when our lunch time came around, the Navy called us down to have sandwich, coffee, and they fed us. So...

Karen Burn: When you were eating lunch, were- were you hearing all kinds of news coming in from Battleship Row? Did you hear about the conditions down there?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Uh.. well, not- not at that time, because we were busy working. However, uh.. it a came about-- well, we had to- we worked and <clears throat> and they- they uh.. we were told now when it got dark, sundown, you guys go back to the shop, because we can't be welding outside. It's blackout now and there's-- if you did any welding, it'd light up the whole sky, right? So you guys go back in the shop and work, because we're out of the work in the shops. So when I went back in the shop, uh.. I saw my friend, this tall, lanky uh.. redhead. He was a burner. He's a good friend of mine. We used to work on big jobs together. "Hey Red, I thought you went out to the Oklahoma." And he started to tear a little bit. I said, "What's the problem?" He said, "You know, I went out there and they laid out the hole." In a standard manhole, access hole, you cut a-- you lay out, it's 18 by 23 inches, kinda oval like. He said, "After they laid out the hole and they told me to cut." Now, you can imagine, underneath these guys are pounding, you

know. They were anxious to get out. He said, "So I did. I burned." I would say it probably took him about half an hour, or one hour to, because the plate's pretty thick, now you're talking about the bottom of the battleship. And he said when I cut it, finished, and then they lifted the plate out, he said "Those guys in there were all dead." So you know, he said, "I killed those guys." I said, "Hey boy. You know, you're not responsible. They told you to do it and you did what you were told." He said "But still yet, you know, I'm the guy." So as a result, they sent him back to the shop. And uh..

Art Gomez: What did he mean by that, he killed them?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Well, what happened--

Art Gomez: What did he think he did?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: You- you see, when- when you are burning, especially heavy plate, there's a lot of slag forming on the bottom side, see. And <clears throat> he said what he did by doing that-- and you can imagine how in the hull of the ship now, there's an air bubble may- maybe. The water had come in, you know. And uh.. the water builds up pressure. And now you're in a pressure bottle, uh.. bubble. And so when this guy burned, you have some oxygen that's left in there, you know, nitrogen, oxygen. <clears throat> And pretty soon, he's burning, slag coming through, hot slag, and it's-- you can imagine burning the oxygen too, taking the oxygen along with it, see? So that these guys were asphyxiated, right? No oxygen to breath, and they died.

Art Gomez: And he couldn't cut through quickly enough.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah. So uh...

Art Gomez: How thick was that plate, George?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: I would say it would have been at least half inch, maybe three-quarter inch thick, you know, being a bottom plating. So what they had to do then, uh.. see the difference in time it took to- to cut this hole out. Then they- that meant that no more burning work and it all had to be with chipping guns. Cutting steel with steel. So by the time when they got all

set up and everything, that might have been about two o'clock in the afternoon, and they started. To make the process easier for cutting, you drill holes. You go and you drill holes maybe every half an inch apart. You know, now you're drilling right through, right? You're drilling, drilling. And then a chipper comes behind and he cuts the same in between, which is relatively easy compared to only chipping. Because I tell you, being a chipper and a caulker, in my opinion, is about as hard a work physically as you can get. Now, you can imagine these guys are down on their hands and knees. And they're working this gun and trying to chip it. When they started, the first group that save, was saved about eight o'clock the next day. So you can imagine. They start- the time they started until they finally got these people out was like what? Eight, sixteen, maybe twenty hours of chipping. And you know, you have the military officers there, everybody's concerned about, you know, getting these people out. So talk about pressure. Not only trying to get the thing done in a hurry, but all these guys on your back about, you know. And a chipper on the best of conditions, if he's standing up and doing a job that's easy. But now he's down on his hands on knees and the deck, the- the sh- the shell of the ship is slippery. And he's, you know, skidding all over, trying to get a- a good feel for it, you know. That's tough. I mean.

Art Gomez: Weren't they taking fire at that time too?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yes.

Art Gomez: Planes were strafing?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah. You know, and when the cold and the smoke burning, all the burning, the oil and all the rods, and the issue is, you know, are you cutting it well. <clears throat>

Art Gomez: And wouldn't there be a chance that uh.. the tanks, the gas, the acetylene tanks could, if hit, would explode?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Well, that was one of the reasons why they stopped burning. Because, you know, uh.. some of the- the compartments that they worked on was free of fumes and, you know. But if you hit a compartment that had fumes in it, and they said that some of the compartments had the uh.. insulation on the bulkhead, you know, on the overhead, and you're burning through insulation, burning through paint. That

all cause noxious gasses, you know. So that- uh.. that would contribute to, you know, uh.. people being, well, not having enough air to breathe, not- not enough oxygen. But when you do it with the uh.. chipping gun, then you know, you're not affecting whatever, uh.. air or whatever is in the compartment, it remains the same.

Karen Burn: Because this is just a hand-powered tool.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah.

Karen Burn: Right.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: You're just using the hand powered tools.

Karen Burn: Right.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: And that's uh.. compressed air. In fact, compressed air going down in there provides breathing, you know, something to breath, additional breathing uh.. you know, air. So uh..

Art Gomez: So the tradeoff is it's safer, but it takes longer.

Karen Burn: Longer.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: It takes longer. Very much longer. Like I say, when it's- when Red had cut that first batch, it took maybe at the most one hour. Now, by chipping, they started when they did. And when they finally rescued anybody, that was like the next day.

Karen Burn: At eight.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: You know. And uh.. and they did the- the bulk of the people that were saved, eventually it was about, what, 31. And uh.. the-- most of them were saved by the eighth of December. And I think the last person was saved about 2:30 on the 9th, 2:30 at the morning, you know,

midnight, past midnight, 2:30 in the morning when they got the last man out. So that was real tedious work. And tedious and hot. And I uh..

Karen Burn: So as far as you know, the last- the last people that anybody rescued came out on December 9th.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah. Yeah.

Karen Burn: And did they think at the time that there were still other people alive trapped in the ship? Could they still hear tapping?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah. What- what I understand, what the Navy did. They posted uh.. a watch on the top side, on the- on the side of the ship to hear, you know, for any more tapping if they would. And they were like, you know, maybe a week, you know, hoping. But uh.. you know, if-- you're only going to live so long under there. Let's face it. You know, the moment you- you breath all the air or whatever is in there, that's it. You- you got no more. So uh...

Art Gomez: Were there other ships that had capsized that were worked on besides the Oklahoma that you know of?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Well there- <clears throat> there was the uh.. Utah had capsized too. But the civilians did not go out on the Utah. What they did, they had military people go out to the Utah. And I understand they rescued some people by using the torch. Now, you talk about being luck, eh? They did it without any problem. We in our efforts failed. I mean, you know. The difference between the two you-- I- I often wondered what happened, you know? And- but I think on the Utah, they probably had a great big compartment that the pe- the person was in so that they had a lot of air in that, versus where this guy Red did, it probably was in a cofferdam. And a cofferdam is narrow, you know, and- and not all that much space in terms of, you know, total volume. So I think that had a lot to do with it.

Karen Burn: So very little oxygen.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah.

Karen Burn: Right.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Very little in there, you know.

Karen Burn: Right.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Uh-huh.

Art Gomez: George, before we move on to that night, I'm wondering about the second attack, whereby they actually did hit the dry dock. And the Shaw was exploded and other ships. Were you anywhere near that?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: No. No. I- I uh.. maybe I need to say something about uh.. that part of it. <clears throat> My shop was near the repair basin. That's on the other end of the shipyard. And that's where we were confined to that area. And very little action actually took part in that, you know, in our area. The area that uh.. had vision or whatever is- and access to whatever is going on, was the 1010 dock and the dry dock area. And those people on that shop, 31 and uh.. 56 and those people on that side, they saw everything going on. We saw, from where we were looking out, Battleship Row, you know. But we were not-- except for that g- crew going out there, our work was confined to the repair basin. But like you say, the Shaw. The Shaw was on a floating dry dock. And, you know, she was attacked and the- the bow eventually blew off. And then the Cassin and Downs in dry dock number one with the Pennsylvania. And uh.. the uh.. shipyard people, shop 56 and the riggers. They knew a lot about manning the fire hose to keep, you know, water on the deck charges that they had on these two destroyers. And uh.. fight the whatever fire was going on, you know. So uh.. they were- they did their share, you know.

Art Gomez: To your knowledge, were there civilian casualties on that side of the dock?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: No. I- I- I don't think- I think we came away from the uh.. December 7th, uh.. if anything, I think we had very little casualties. I don't think we had any casualties. Because it wasn't in a shipyard, it wasn't published. You know, usually, the word goes around. Hey, so and so got killed, or whatever. But we were uh.. fortunate in that respect, in that uh..

Karen Burn: That nobody working out on the ships was hurt either, right.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: That's right, you see. Yeah. Yeah.

Karen Burn: Yeah.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Although uh.. I was told later that uh.. we had one person. Because when we were in the shop, I wasn't aware of the fact that uh.. other people had come to work that day. So, you know, we were kinda-- if they went out, they went on their own, and we were on our own. So uh.. I couldn't- I couldn't vouch for, you know, people getting killed and stuff like that. But uh..

Karen Burn: So once it got dark, they sent you inside to work.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Oh yeah, yeah. Uh-huh.

Karen Burn: Because of the blackout. So what- what were you doing inside?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Well, again, we had uh... plates to butt. Because, you know, plates come in a certain size and you have to maybe make up larger plates. Uh.. especially splinter shields, you know, for guns. You put up a plate that's maybe about five feet high around this gun to keep shrapnel from, you know, hitting the gun crew and the gun foundations. And so much to be done, you know. Making uh.. foundations, not only for uh... gun mounts, but uh.. like electronics equipment or- or uh.. <clears throat> uh..machinery. Base, base for different pumps. And uh.. we did a lot of foundation work for the other shops and that type of thing. But- but there's no- no uh.. end to the amount of work that, you know, we had to do in that respect, yeah.

Karen Burn: And how long did you continue doing that?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Well, I tell you. We uh.. we worked that night, the first night, till uh.. midnight. And then uh.. and you know, after six o'clock that evening, uh.. usually we take a break. We have our- our lunch at noon. And then you eat about six o'clock if you're working two shifts. But uh.. six o'clock came around and uh.. the word was, the water's been poisoned in the

shipyard and there's no food in the shipyard. So, you know. So by midnight, when we went home, you know, we were pretty hungry. But uh.. "Okay you guys, you go home and you come back tomorrow morning." Okay.

Art Gomez: Were the civilian workers expecting another attack?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: I think- I think even the military was expecting another attack because like I said, we had to draw out, you know, those helmets and gas masks. And I'm thinking well, on the job, we probably wouldn't need it. But in a shop you would need it, you know, because. And uh.. 'cause that night, anything that was flying, guys were shooting it. They were trigger happy. So that all night long, boom, boom, you're hearing this, you know, sh- from all over the shipyard, guns firing. Uh.. but again, I think they really expected another, you know, attack. Uh..

Art Gomez: What about your families? What- what were thinking while you-- you knew you had to stay there, you knew you had to work. Did you have any contact with your families? Did anyone know what- what-- if Honolulu had been hit?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Well, uh.. see, that morning, December 7, my-- our whole procedure in the shipyard, we work in certain areas with pool, carpool. And you'd go to work. You know, you'd pick up maybe three or four boys and then you'd go to work. That morning, my wife drove me and uh.. Johnny Santos, Charlie Bailey and uh.. and another guy, uh.. Pat Lidra [ph?] into work, all the way into Pearl Harbor. And when she dropped me, I says, "Hon, you know, be sure you're here at 3:30, quarter to we get through work." So off she went. That day I was so busy, I never had any thoughts about calling her. I don't think we could have called, because I think everything on the phone was censored. I think they were totally backed out. But... Anyway, so midnight this- this friend of mine, Pat Lidra [ph?] and I, we lived in the same area in Kai Moki [ph?] behind Pearl Harbor. So I got with Pat. I says, "Pat, we gotta go home." "Yeah." He said "How are we going home?" I said, "Well, we'll go out through the main gate and there must be Army vehicles, Marine vehicles, going to Kanoi [ph?]. So we should be able to hike a ride back into town." Okay, good idea. So we walked all the way from the shipyard out to the main gate. And we talked to the sentry, you know. Uh.. "We'd like to get a ride to town." We showed him our badge, you know, we're Pearl- Pearl Harbor workers. And if you stop a military truck or whatever, we can hitch a ride." "Yeah, okay." So along comes a big Army truck. So he asked the Army truck

driver. Uh.. "These guys want to go to town. You going to town?" He said, "Well, I'll pass near town." So, okay. But the driver says, "You know what? Two of you, okay. One of you go on the right side, on the right fender. And one of you on the left fender." "What for?" It's dark, you know, and I'm thinking we could hit something and there- there I am, I'm gonna be dead. I said, "What for?" He said, "Well, I can't turn my lights on. Total blackout." He said, "So if you go there, you can see when I'm going too far right and this guy can see when I'm going too far left. And you can tell me right, left, or straight- straight ahead." So this is what we did. We did that all the way into town. And n- not going very fast. He could go, you know, faster. And if we were going straight, then he'd pick up speed. You know, with us kinda like, "Hey, you're going too far on the right. You know, how about a little bit more left," you know. And- and we're going down. And finally he got to a familiar street where we'd turn off. He said, "Hey you guys, I'm gonna have to turn off, drop you guys off here." "Okay, thank you." So we got off and we were like, maybe half a mile from the _____. <clears throat> Pat and I said, "You know what? We're gonna have to continue on to home. So what's our next step?" Well, let's go down to the police station, we were half a mile from the police station. There must be activity down there and maybe cocoah." Good idea. So we went down to the police station. And there's people running all over the offices, you know. And we went to the desk sergeant. Uh.. "Sergeant?" "Yeah." I said, "How about some sandwiches, coffee?" "What the hell's the matter with you guys? We get barely enough to eat ourselves, we're gonna give you something?" I said, "Hey, you know, we bust our okole down in the shipyard, we're working shipyard. Tired, you know?" "Okay. Here, have a sandwich." So we had a sandwich. And then after we ate, we told him, "You know, we got a problem." "So what now?" "Oh, we live on Kai Moki[ph?]. We want a ride home." He said, "Well, you guys hang around. The next beat officer give you a ride." "Okay, good." So we hung around, you know, watching all these guys running around and everything. So finally he said, "Okay, you guys got a ride. Louie's going out that area." So we went out with this officer, got on his car. And uh.. from the business section to the police station it's only about one, two, about three blocks. So we got on and we got out there. We got on a main road going down two blocks. "Halt! Who goes there?" "Police officer." "Let me see your badge." So he's got to show the guard, you know, the sentry, the badge. "Okay, continue." We hit this Bishop Street and King. And there's another guy. So after the police officer, identi- identified himself, the guy says, "You know, there's a light on this- in this building here. And the word is, no lights." The guy said, the police officer said, "Yes, I got the word on the radio. There's a light on in that building." So he tells us "You guys wait here. I'll go take care of that light." "Okay." So he went out. Ten minutes later, he comes back. Well, before that, we hear shots firing, pow, pow, pow. Then he comes back.

Said, "What happened?" He said, "Oh, I had to shoot the light out." <laughs> Now this is the bank security light. You know, and we thought well, you know, big deal. Everybody's gone haywire, you know, trigger happy. But anyway. So we got on and beyond that, every block we hit like, there's a sentry on every block. And these guys-- now, sentries are young kids. They have taken these kids, some of them are the military in high school, like our school, Kamehameha. And they had posted these guys, you know, all of the important town area. So every- ever- just about every block we hit. Stop, identify yourself, you know, and so on. But we finally got up to Kai Moki [ph?]. And this guy says, "Well, I gotta off to St. Louis Heights. So you guys make it?" "Oh no, no problem." By then we were about maybe one- one mile from home. So we thought "Great big deal," so you know, we were home now just about. So where we lived, Pat lived one side of a park. Kai Moki we have our big park, and Pat was on one side, I was on the opposite side. And we left, and I said, "I'll pick you up in the morning." "Yeah, okay. We'll get regular drivers to pick us up." So when I got home, I knocked on the door. My wife came, she opened the door. She says, "Wow, you're home." I said, "So what I'm home?" She says, "I thought everybody was killed out there at Pearl Harbor." I said, "Well, not everybody. You know, I'm home, I'm alive." So by then, it's like two o'clock in the morning, you know. And uh.. just had enough time to-- seemed like, you know, I took a bath and got in clean clothes and all that. My wife is making me something to eat. And got through with that eating. I couldn't eat very much, you know, all the excitement and everything. I figured I need sleep. Got in bed and pretty soon, time to get up and go back to work. But uh.. the uh.. shipyard people made a contribution. I mean, I think we did a lot to, you know, getting-- and you know, at times during the war where we, you open up a compartment and you smell, you know. You know how human bodies smell when they're-- Of course, whenever that happened, we'd notify the ship people and they would notify the medical people, and they would come up, you know, come out and clean. Clean whatever, you know, was in uh.. Because some of those accidents happening out there, when uh.. if you were in a compartment and- and that explosion happened at- at your area, and to keep water from going all over the ship, they'd close the watertight door. And you're in there. Too bad. So that's the way it was.

Karen Burn: So- so when you- you went back to work in the shipyard on the eighth, how many- how many days did you continue to go back and had welding to do all day? Several?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah, well, we- we did that. Uh.. well, in fact, when we did that, we went into-- well, we soon found out that you couldn't work 16

hours a day too long. You know, a man gets tired. You can only go-- if you're working. If you're goofing off or something else. But if you're really putting out, doing your best to get the job done, it becomes tiring. You can only go so much. So they cut back from 16 to 12 hours. We were working seven days a week now, if you're talking how many days full time, seven days a week. And we went from 12 hours and then eventually down to 10 hours. And 10 hours is long enough. But, you know, that's the way it was. And uh.. everybody, you know, working and uh.. see, prior to the war, in 1939, uh.. the Navy laid out a contract for their dry docks. And also, they updated all the shops, beautiful. So when December 7 happened, we were like we were ready in terms of equipment. And what they did on top of that, we had a- a boatload of civilian workers brought in on the SS Washington from the West uh.. the East Coast. And they came in to the shipyard. And they joined our crews. And you know, it's-- now we're getting additional workers in the shipyard.

Karen Burn: Right.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: We got this beautiful building and now we're getting additional workers that we need.

Karen Burn: Okay.

Art Gomez: Did the Navy compensate you in pay? Was there any increase?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: We- we- we had reg- the regular pay. And like I said, we started with dollar six an hour then it was dollar twelve and dollar eighteen. And- and that was the pay that we got. We got, you know, and plus overtime. If you worked overtime, beyond 40 hours, time and a half.

Karen Burn: Time and a half.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah. Uh-huh.

Karen Burn: I think- I think we're running out of time. Is there anything else you want to tell us about? Did you- did you make it down later on to Battleship Row or anything else you want to tell us about your memories of the attack?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Well, I'll tell you uh.. December 7th, right after that, the penc-- you see, then the Navy had to decide, you know, priority. Which ships, what job is going to be done first, right? It made sense. You know, you want to get ships out of the- out of the shipyard in a hurry. So the first ship they got out was the Pennsylvania. You know, she was in dry dock, but, you know, she was able to repair her. And- and- and she was in our yard a little bit. And she was gone. She- I think she went out to join a- like join a fleet. And then after that, uh.. they brought in the Helena. Helena went into dry dock number two. And number two wasn't even completed yet, not the back half. They had a case on and they had, the back half wasn't com- uh.. ready. But the front half wasn't done. But there was enough to get a ship in. So the Helena came into dry dock number two with hull damage. And we worked on her. The Honolulu, with that bomb that exploded, that didn't hit her but hit the dock and exploded in the bottom of the bay. All that explosion caused the plate to buckle and caused- and rupture. So the Honolulu came into dry dock number one. So we had to work on it. Now, when you have ship repair, you know the ship has shape, right? You have to get what we call the book of off- offsets. The book gives you the location, the width of a ship, the length, the shape. And what you have to do with this, we have uh.. made a model of, upstairs in shop 11. Up the top deck was this deck the whole width and length of the building. And you can lay out the whole ship, the body of a ship on this. And from there, you take templates. Now, when a ship comes in and you know, okay, damage is between frame 69 and 89, then they lay out that section, and now we know what the section's supposed to be like. So then they would take templates. They would take shape template, you know, because the frames, uh.. mainframes, bulkhead, and then the side plating. And all the attempts that you make. And then it goes down to what we call in the shop the layout section. In the layout, we'd take the plates out and we layout all the templates on a plate. And then it's trimmed, cut to suit, and then they mark all the stations, this is frame 49, this is bulkhead 62 or whatever, and transverse frame, whatever. Transverse frame and longitudinals, and all the parts I identified.

Karen Burn: Right. It's a lot of specialized work to repair.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: A lot of specialized work.

Karen Burn: Right.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: And repair.

Karen Burn: Right. And do you- can you remember how many ships total you think you repaired from the attack?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: From the attack? By the end of-- say by the-- I think it was in- in Janu-- well, about June, July. About August of '42, August of '42, the ships that were in Battleship Row and those that others out there all repaired.

Karen Burn: All repaired.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Either permanently or uh.. temporarily.

Karen Burn: Tempor- temporarily.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: And- and in those that we had to and ships that were going maybe back to uh.. May Island or Bremerton for final updating for wartime conditions. You know, adding on guns and all of that. It would go out. And those that we thought, now, the determination was made by planning department, the design engineers and those guys. And now, you know, they're communicating with the Navy Department, _____, all these, you know, big Navy people. And they're deciding what ship's going to where and what the yard, Navy yard and that type of thing. And we did all the repairs--

Karen Burn: All the--

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: --to these ships.

Karen Burn: Right.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: You see. And we- we had these ships. And that's why I say, you know, the- there's a spinning we did over to get those ships out. In fact, <clears throat> there were times when Navy brass would come through the shop. And they look at what we are doing and they are totally amazed.

Karen Burn: Mm-hm.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: So this guy, they would say, "You know, you people are the heroes. You got a job for life, don't have to worry."

Karen Burn: Just like they told you. <laughs>

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Well, uh.. you know. When the war- there- you know, war can't go on forever.

Karen Burn: Right.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: It's got to end until someday.

Art Gomez: Just I want to ask one question, bring you up to date.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah, yeah.

Art Gomez: Today.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah.

Art Gomez: Have you ever talked to anybody on the Oklahoma that you know was saved through that- through that opening?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Well, you know, e- even if they were saved or workers? You mean one, you don't mean--

Art Gomez: The ones that were saved.

Karen Burn: Sailors.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: No, I- I- I--

Art Gomez: Have you ever met one?

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: No, I often wanted, you know, I often wanted to do that, you know, be able to say, "Look, you know. You know." And shake hands with him and tell him, you know, you-- you know, because they were part of the team, and we saved their lives. I- and when I say, the shop efforts, you know, the whole people and everything. But I never had that opportunity.

Karen Burn: Well, maybe you will this week.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Oh yeah, I hope so.

Karen Burn: Maybe so.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah.

Art Gomez: Okay.

Karen Burn: All right.

Art Gomez: Great.

Karen Burn: That was fascinating.

Art Gomez: That was absolutely great.

Karen Burn: Yes, thank you so much.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Oh, well--

Art Gomez: The Oklahoma is having its own reunion within this bigger reunion.

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Yeah.

Art Gomez: You really need to contact whoever the head of that chapter is. It would be wonderful if you could meet somebody that--

George H. Kahanu, Sr.: Now- now you know one thing I- I didn't mention. Uh.. when the Tennessee was brought into the shipyard, and uh.. we had to repair the number three turret deck. It had taken a bomb hit, and the bomb

went right through. And what we had to do is put a plate, cover the hole, and then weld around it. But on the forward end of the Tennessee, she had some damage forward too. And you know, there was a crew of people working up there. So I- I won--

[audio ends abruptly]

End of Tape 419 George H. Kahanu, Sr.